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INFORMATION CIRCULAR

To: Members of the staff

From: The Assistant Secretary-General for Human Resources Management

Subject: GUIDELINES FOR PROMOTING EQUAL TREATMENT OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE SECRETARIAT*

1. The United Nations is required, under Article 8 of the Charter, to provide a working environment in which men and women can participate in all activities of the Organization under conditions of equality. The Organization is further required, under Article 101, paragraph 3, of the Charter, to ensure that staff members possess and maintain the highest standards of integrity. Attitudes and perceptions that prevent the full participation in the work of the Organization of any staff member or group of staff members are destructive, undermining and discriminatory and fail to meet the standards required of staff by the Charter.

2. The purpose of the present circular is:

(a) To alert staff members to attitudes, behaviour and language that impede equal treatment of men and women in the Secretariat;

(b) To indicate behaviour that may constitute sexual harassment, and to advise staff members who believe they have been subjected to sexual harassment of the recourse available to them.

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* Personnel Manual index No. 1171.

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Guidelines for equal treatment of men and women

3. Gender is not a valid consideration under the Staff Rules in decisions on appointment, transfer or promotion, except when in accordance with the measures designed to improve the status of women in the Secretariat which were adopted pursuant to numerous General Assembly resolutions. Criteria for evaluation are competence, efficiency and integrity, as well as a variety of personal characteristics such as strength of character, intellectual ability, decisiveness, capacity for leadership, sensitivity, compassion and fairness. All these characteristics are found in both men and women and are not typical personality traits of either sex.

4. No job is the exclusive preserve of either sex. Accordingly, every effort must be made to avoid making assumptions about capabilities based on stereotypes. In assessing performance and in assigning work, care should be taken to use a standard related to the requirements of the job. The use of non-job-related criteria, or arbitrary ideas of suitability, is not compatible with full and fair consideration.

5. A stereotype is an assumption about an individual based on some perceived or imagined characteristic of the group to which he or she belongs. All staff members should be aware of the need to avoid the use of derogatory terms alluding to stereotypes based on race, religion, ethnic origin or nationality and not to act on assumptions that discriminate on those grounds. No assumptions should be made about an individual's character or capability based on appearance.

6. Equally offensive to human dignity is behaviour or language based on sex stereotypes. Stereotypes about one gender or about sexual orientation are generally related to assumptions about a particular gender's "proper" role, capabilities, demeanour or character. Common to all stereotypical thinking is the denial of individuality and limitation of the options of the person concerned. It may also distort perceptions about performance and capability.

7. Bias-free language is important because language reflects the attitudes of the user. Expressions or words that suggest superiority of one gender over the other should be avoided. Such expressions may include jokes that demean one gender, pictures or posters that portray individuals as sex objects and unwelcome references to a person's appearance or body; all serve to deny colleagues their dignity and respect and contribute to an atmosphere in which inequality is emphasized. Such expressions and language, if pervasive, may even constitute sexual harassment as defined in paragraph 12 below.

8. Staff members' preference as to whether they wish to be called by their first name or surname should be respected. A woman staff member may choose to be addressed either as Ms., Mrs. or Miss, since a woman's marital status is irrelevant in the work situation. Her preference will also be followed in staff listings and other official communications.

9. Staff members collectively should not be referred to as if they were all male. Neutral terms should be used whenever persons of both sexes are included, particularly in official documents of the Organization. Titles which appear to exclude women should be avoided if possible.

10. Discriminatory treatment often takes place when there is an imbalance of power or a difference of status between the persons involved. Those who have power and authority, predominantly male, may make unfair assumptions about the proper role of lower-ranking staff. The need for common courtesy and considerate behaviour between people regardless of rank is self-evident. Secretarial and clerical staff members may find some kinds of office behaviour to be inconsiderate: for instance, being kept standing, being kept waiting during long telephone calls, being given dictation for unnecessarily long periods or texts for typing that are not easily decipherable, and not being given due appreciation for performing especially demanding tasks. While secretaries have primary responsibility for answering the telephone, other staff can also do so. For example, during lunch hours, responsibility for covering an office and answering the telephone should be shared. All staff members should recognize that the time, intelligence and initiative of their co-workers is worthy of consideration regardless of their sex or rank.

11. While understanding and helpfulness is an important aspect of office conduct between staff regardless of rank, it is an abuse of power if supervisors require staff members to make arrangements on their behalf unrelated to official business or to undertake personal tasks for them. For instance, secretarial and clerical staff should not be expected automatically to fetch coffee or perform other personal tasks when those are not part of their official duties. It is axiomatic that the conduct of senior staff must be free of intimidation or personal favouritism, and in this regard, solicitation or acceptance by them of favours, gifts or loans from more junior staff is unacceptable.

Guidelines for dealing with incidents of sexual harassment

12. Sexual harassment is defined by paragraph 2 of administrative instruction ST/AI/379 of 29 October 1992 as:

> "any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favours or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, when it interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. It is particularly serious when behaviour of this kind is engaged in by any official who is in a position to influence the career or employment conditions (including hiring, assignment, contract renewal, performance evaluation or promotion) of the recipient of such attentions."

13. Sexual harassment of a person of either sex is unacceptable behaviour which may seriously harm its victim and will often lower staff morale and damage the work environment. Such behaviour may constitute sufficient ground for disciplinary measures under chapter X of the Staff Rules. Managers and

supervisors should be aware that sexual harassment may occur. They must make every effort to ensure that their staff work under conditions free from sexual harassment and to redress any inappropriate action or decision taken as a consequence of an incident of sexual harassment.

14. The informal and formal procedures established for dealing with sexual harassment are set out in ST/AI/379 of 29 October 1992.